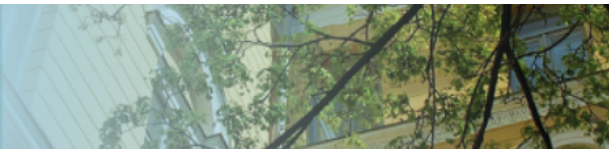


Language and the Scientific Imagination
The 11th International Conference of ISSEI
Language Centre, University of Helsinki (Finland)
28 July – 2 August 2008



Javier Cercas's *Soldiers of Salamis* and the Recovery of 'Historical Memory' in Today's Spain

Though the Spanish Civil War occurred over seventy years ago, it is crucial to an understanding of Spain today. It resulted in massive destruction and the death and exile of over a million people¹; severe shortages and rationing lasted well into the 1950s, and censorship and the brutal repression of opponents continued until Franco's death in November 1975. With the democratic process spearheaded by the young King, culminating in the referendum on the new Constitution in December, 1978, memoirs, novels, feature films and documentaries based on Civil War and postwar experiences flourished. One of the most successful of these was the novel by Javier Cercas, *Soldados de Salamina*,² which just over a year after its publication in 2001 went into its 23rd printing. A consideration of the reasons for its popularity help illuminate the shifting approaches of Spaniards to the aftermath of the Civil War and the long dictatorship of Francisco Franco; or as Sebastian Faber frames it in terminology deriving from the South African experience: the evolving attitudes towards memory, peace, truth, justice and reconciliation in post-Franco Spain.³ Omar Encarnación places the Spanish transition in the context of the “transitional justice movement” of the last thirty years citing not only South Africa but also Argentina, East Timor and Liberia (435-436).

The “Pactos de la Moncloa” refers to the agreements reached by the disparate groups that came together in the early years after Franco’s death—from government officials appointed by Franco to members of the Socialist and Communist parties—to put aside differences and issues that could cause conflict in order for the democratic transition to proceed unencumbered. However much one questions today the implications of some of these agreements, the image of Franco’s Parliament voting itself out of existence to make way for the first free elections in forty years is still extraordinary. Of these agreements, the so-called “pact of forgetting” is the most controversial as it granted amnesty to those responsible for the human rights abuses perpetrated on the opponents of fascism both during and after the War (Encarnación 438).

The prominent contemporary historian Santos Juliá has come under attack for his assertion that “amnesty does not equal amnesia.”⁴ From the outset Juliá differentiates between history and memory: history is based on fact, *is* knowledge, tends towards the objective; memory is personal. The idea that only the persons who actually experienced an event have the right to speak of their memory (19) carries an implicit critique by Juliá implying that the word “memory” along with other relevant terminology has been over-used and employed to fit different groups’ own agendas. Only in the case of a group of individuals who experienced and were affected by the same event can one refer to “collective memory” (18). And “historical memory” a crucial term in the debate within Spain is, in Juliá’s view, the result of the “politics of history” dependent on “the meaning with which a certain power tries to endow the past in order to legitimize an action in the present” (19). Juliá’s annoyance with what he considers an unjust label imposed upon

Spain undoubtedly reflects the feeling of countless Spaniards who one day discovered that their much vaunted peaceful transition was the object of condemnation. Their innate conviction of the illegality of the Franco regime, not officially declared by the Spanish government until the early years of the twenty-first century, prevented them from seeing the need for public recognition of these facts. This acknowledgement was necessary in order to counterbalance the Francoist discourse of almost forty years portraying the vanquished Republicans as “reds” and “murderers,” and to recognize, as Faber points out, “the fact that historians study and identify or quantify certain acts of violence and repression does not give a voice to those who suffered it” (I 209).

Spaniards had assimilated certain ideas they didn’t even need to give voice to, and which prevented them from seeing another necessary piece of the picture. Another internalized emotion shared among all sides of the political spectrum and which led to the “pact of forgetting” was fear, even among the younger generations, of another Civil War.

Still another factor was that the Left itself went along with the so-called pact of silence for a number of reasons: it preferred to avoid bringing up its own excesses (the attacks on Churches and killing of priests and nuns by workers and anarchist militias under the Spanish Republic and during the War; the elimination of the more radical elements within the left by the Communist Party, as testified by George Orwell in *Homage to Catalonia*), though the greatest number of crimes was perpetrated on the Left not only during the War but afterwards, when as many as 500,000, many of whom were executed, were held in concentration camps.⁵ Furthermore, a sense of shame for the image of a backward Spain

that would be publicly aired explained the reluctance to pursue a systematic investigation of the regime's crimes. As a member of the democratic opposition explained to me in the last days of the dictatorship, the regime had lasted so long that in the minds of the regime's opponents it was as if Franco had already died, and so when he did die, there was no looking back. The young Socialists focused on accomplishing a profound modernization of Spain: legalizing abortion, limiting the role of the Catholic Church in education, tackling the renovation of outdated infrastructure, and fomenting industrial investment.

If one reason for the success of *Soldiers of Salamis* is literary, the highly effective way in which it blurs the line between history and fiction, another is historical: due to a conjunction of events, the Spanish public was particularly receptive to a fictional work portraying investigative efforts intended to document a singular example of humanity within the chaos of war. Before a brief analysis of the novel, some answers to this question will be suggested: Why, after a quarter of a century after Franco's death did the awareness of the need for the recovery of "historical memory" arise?

One of the main reasons was the arrest in Britain of Augusto Pinochet, following a 1996 indictment on a warrant issued by the Spanish judge Baltasar Garzón⁶ based on the illegal arrest and execution of fifty Spanish citizens in Chile during Pinochet's dictatorship.

Ironically, as Omar Encarnación points out, this event, which was proof of the independence achieved by the judiciary in the new democratic Spain, unleashed an international wave of finger-pointing at Spain for neglecting to confront its own

unresolved history of crimes against humanity. Numerous Spaniards for whom Garzón's order was another act in a line of uninterrupted solidarity towards the Chilean people were once again awakened to the need to confront their own history. The special fascination that the event held over the Spanish psyche was further explained by the writer Francisco Umbral who observed that "for the Spanish people, the Pinochet arrest is the vicarious dream of historical impossibility, that of Franco being arrested in bed" (Encarnación 449).

An additional factor was the impulse among younger Spaniards, aware that their grandparents' generation was dying out, to learn the details of what happened to the victims of Franco (Faber I, 211). In 2000 the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory (ARMH) was created by Emilio Silva, whose own grandfather was shot to death by Franco's army (Encarnación 450). While Franco exhumed the graves of those who died on his side, there had been no sustained effort after his death to do so for the Republicans. According to the United Nations there were thought to be 30,000 unmarked graves throughout the country (Encarnación 450). In October of 2000 the first exhumation sponsored by the ARMH, and financed by private funds, took place in the province of León unearthing thirteen bodies.⁷

The political landscape in Spain had an impact on the efforts to recover historical memory. Prime Minister José María Aznar's conservative Popular Party government, which began in 1996, just around the time of Garzón's efforts to indict Pinochet, was hostile towards these efforts as well as towards the project to locate and honor the victims

of the Franco regime.⁸ Perhaps the tension between the government and popular awareness heightened the sense of urgency of the need to foment investigative memory projects.

Aznar's party was voted out of office in March, 2004; the new Socialist Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, himself the grandson of a Captain in the Republican army who was executed for refusing to join the rebellion against the Republic, soon formed a government commission charged with laying the groundwork for the "Law of Historical Memory" which was passed by the Spanish Congress of Deputies in October of 2007. The law provides reparations to families of victims, gives official funding to the continuing efforts to elucidate victims' stories and locate the whereabouts of the dead, grants Spanish citizenship to the children and grandchildren of the exiles, and provides procedures for the eradication of sentences handed down by Franco's courts during and after the Civil War.⁹

Clearly the publication of *Soldados de Salamina* in March of 2001 coincided with the renewed attention throughout Spain to recover historical memory. Two features of the novel: the proliferation of real people and true events that propel the fictional narrative, as well as the recreation of the process of gathering detailed documentation to reconstruct an episode of the Civil War, lend to the story's verisimilitude. Particularly effective, in the view of Juan Carlos Martín, is the autobiographical aspect: the narrator, a journalist and unsuccessful novelist, is also named Javier Cercas.¹⁰

The novel's point of departure is the story first told to the narrator by the distinguished contemporary novelist Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio, born in 1927, of his father's escape from execution in the last days of the War. The writer and intellectual Rafael Sánchez Mazas (1894-1966) was one of the founders, in 1933, of Falange, the Spanish fascist party. Imprisoned in Barcelona by the Republicans towards the end of the War, Sánchez Mazas was taken with other Nationalist prisoners into the Catalan countryside as the Republicans retreated from Franco's advancing forces at the end of January 1939.

In a rush to reach the French border, the Republicans executed several of these prisoners; Sánchez Mazas was among those taken out to be shot, but the bullets just grazed him and he managed to make his way into the woods. A young Republican soldier happened upon his hiding place and while gazing at the fleeing fascist, responded to another soldier's shout: "Is he there?" with the denial "There's nobody over here!" (12), enabling the writer to hide out until he rejoined the advancing Nationalists.

That this amazing anecdote is true further cements the novel's play between history and fiction. As his decision to write about Sánchez Mazas begins to take shape, the fictional narrator resolves to write "a true tale." Indeed, in true Cervantine manner, Cercas pokes fun at himself: the reader is initially unfavorably impressed by Cercas's narrator, an aspiring but failed novelist, undergoing an early mid-life crisis, whose girlfriend, an astrologer, he often belittles for her seeming lack of intellectual achievements. At the same time the narrator brings up the issue of a specific fictional genre, when he asserts to

Aguirre, another journalist who has written about the episode: “I don’t write novels any more, ... Besides, it’s not a novel, it’s a true story” (24).

Soldiers of Salamis is divided into three parts: the first, “The Forest Friends” relates step-by-step the narrator’s search for people, places, and documents which are crucial to an investigation of the facts of Sánchez Mazas’s escape, portraying a process that mirrored the searches going on in Spain at the time of the novel’s publication.

The second part, entitled “Soldiers of Salamis” just like the novel itself, is essentially the book about Sánchez Mazas that the narrator had resolved to write at the end of Part I, written in a style clearly different from that of the first part: a kind of rhythmic verbosity evincing the self-satisfaction of the book’s fictional author. A biographical narration of the life of the fascist writer, it centers on the execution incident, along with an analysis of Sánchez Mazas’s character. The fictional Cercas’s fascination with an inherent contradiction -- “between Sánchez Mazas’s bellicose Falangist ideas and his apolitical and aestheticizing literary task” (84)—underlies the entire section.

The opening scene demonstrates the technique behind the narrator’s “true tale.” Basing himself on testimony and facts gleaned from his research, the narrator cautions that he is presenting “not what actually happened, but rather what seems probable might have happened” (80). He sketches in actions, thoughts, dialogues, and entire scenes that he could not have witnessed, and that bring to life Sánchez Mazas’s experiences and the people he encountered on his way. In doing so, Cercas also humanizes Civil War history,

showing that circumstances were not just black or white, that the players, no matter which side they fought on, had real emotions. Nevertheless, contrary to Faber's assertion that by privileging humane actions Cercas "delinks" life and politics (Faber II, 149), political ideals do indeed emerge as fundamental components in Spain today, as in the staunchly leftist Conchi's appreciation of the ideals that fueled the struggle against fascism in the 1930s. In Part III, "Appointment in Stockton" the narrator comes to realize what Conchi instinctively knew, that his true tale doesn't work because it has fascist protagonist!

It is the Chilean novelist Roberto Bolaño (1953-2003) –in reality a friend and literary mentor of Cercas—who gives the narrator the missing piece with his chatty meditation on "And what's a hero?" (142). For Bolaño, Salvador Allende, the democratically elected President of Chile who was overthrown by Pinochet, was a hero, someone "who understands that a hero isn't the one who kills, but the one who doesn't kill or who lets himself get killed" (143). Bolaño tells the narrator the story of another hero, the war veteran he had met years before when he worked as a night watchman at a camping site on the Barcelona coast (another true story). The old man had not only fought against Franco's forces during the Civil War, he continued to fight in World War II against the Nazis, going into exile in France at the War's end after eight long years of fighting for freedom.

If the Franco regime honored only *its* fallen, and humiliated the vanquished Republicans, Cercas's narrator subverts the Francoist script by establishing Antoni Miralles, the object

of Bolaño's story, as the protagonist of his book. The freedom fighter Miralles is a true hero while Sánchez Mazas is not, and therefore cannot be the protagonist –not just because he was an aesthete, incapable of physical fighting, but because his ideas launched a war that caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands.

Bolaño and the narrator are on the same wavelength, touching on the relationship between reality, fiction and journalism. Bolaño advises the discouraged novelist to take heart: "To write novels you don't need an imagination, . . . Just a memory. Novels are written by combining recollections" (146). With Bolaño's mention of Norman Mailer and Truman Capote, creators of the "non-fiction novel" in the 1960s and '70s, Cercas reminds the reader of his chosen genre, and provides a literary context for it.

In the final part of the novel, Cercas highlights the contrast between reality and fiction in such a way that the fictional action emerges as even more real. Though Bolaño admonishes that reality "always ends up betraying us," advising the narrator to "make him up" instead of looking for Miralles (166), Cercas is so invested in Miralles's story that he just wants to find the old man, not caring any more about finishing his novel.

While Part II is slow-going, in Part III however, the reader races headlong into the passionate, painstaking search undertaken by the narrator and Conchi turned detectives. It is breathtaking to witness the fictional Cercas's epiphany. Comparing Miralles's trajectory with Sánchez Mazas's whereabouts at the end of the Civil War, the narrator

intuitively identifies Miralles as the young soldier who saved the fascist author from execution.

When the fictional Cercas finally tracks down Miralles, the old man resumes the meditation on what is a hero when he modestly sums up: “The real heroes are born out of war and die in war. There are no living heroes, young man. They’re all dead” (197). The reader may surmise that if Miralles is neither surprised nor displeased when the narrator turns up in Dijon it is because the young writer will be the vessel through which his comrades continue to live on: the García Segué brothers (Joan and Lela), Miquel Cardos, Cagi Baldrich, Pipo Cana, el Gordo Odena, Santi Brugada and Jordi Gudayol (198).

While the narrator used to think that stories about the Spanish Civil War were nothing more than “excuses for old men’s nostalgia and fuel for the imagination of unimaginative novelists” (8), as he heads back to Spain his ultimate goal becomes clear: by writing down their names and stories he would keep alive the memory of Miralles, his comrades, the forest friends, . . . and of Bolaño’s Latin Americans –“that he’d always dreamt of resuscitating in his novels” (147).

The significance of Cercas’s novel for Spaniards is that memory must endure, not just to remember the suffering of the victims, but to celebrate and be grateful for the heroism of those who fought for a free Spain. Cercas’s narrator may be nothing more than a provincial journalist investigating a given episode from one of the many wars of the twentieth century, yet the “lone soldier” the narrator visualizes at the end of *Soldiers of*

Salamis transcends national borders, representing all those who cherish freedom; it is about “when all of civilization depends on a single man, and about that man and about how civilization repays that man” (208).

The conclusion of Encarnación’s study is that “one size does not fit all” (438) and that while the democratic transition in Spain “violated all the rules associated with the transitional justice movement” (437) much was advanced. Spaniards themselves must debate and renegotiate the old political pacts. So let a Spaniard have the final words of this article. In a series of dialogues with David Trueba, the director of the film version of *Soldiers of Salamis* (2003), Javier Cercas observed:

The transition wiped the slate clean and did not judge whom it needed to judge... I’m not saying that it should have happened; I’m saying it did not happen. So of course, there’s a historical debt. Yet all these things are happening now. And that’s not just good, it’s indispensable. (130)¹¹

Francisca González Arias

Department of Cultural Studies, The University of Massachusetts, Lowell

Department of Hispanic Studies, Boston University

14 Dudley Street

¹ Omar Encarnación, "Reconciliation after Democratization: Coping With this Past in Spain," *Political Science Quarterly* 123 (2008): 435-459. Encarnación cites 700,000 dead including those killed by Franco after the war's end in April, 1939.

² Javier Cercas, *Soldiers of Salamis*, (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2003), trans. Anne McLean.

³ Sebastian Faber, "Revis(it)ing the Past: Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation in Post-Franco Spain," *Revista Hispánica Moderna*, LIX (2006): 141-154. This is the second of Faber's two articles reviewing recent publications in Spain on the topic. The first is "The Price of Peace: Historical Memory in Post-Franco Spain, a Review-Article," *Revista Hispánica Moderna*, LVIII (2005), 205-219. Quotations from these articles will be identified as Faber I or Faber II, according to their chronological publication.

⁴ Santos Juliá, "Presentación," in *Memoria de la guerra y del franquismo*, ed. Santos Juliá (Madrid: Santillana, 2006), 15-26. All English translations of quotations from Juliá's Introduction to this collection on *Memory of the War and of the Franco Regime* are by the author of this article.

⁵ Figure cited by Javier Rodrigo in *Los campos de concentración franquistas* (Madrid: Siete Mares, 2003) (Faber II, 142).

⁶ Baltasar Garzón is a judge of the Audiencia Nacional, a high court of Spain which has jurisdiction throughout the country, and hears cases of grave national or international significance such as terrorism, organized crime, or crimes against humanity.

⁷ The ARMH's home page maintains a summary of that first exhumation in Priaranza, León, and constantly updates information regarding ongoing exhumations. See: <http://www.memoriahistorica.org>

⁸ Aznar had paid to exhume graves of several Spanish soldiers of the Blue Division, sent by Franco to support Nazi troops during World War II, and maintained official funding of the Francoist political group.

⁹ Acting on this law, Baltasar Garzón issued an order in September of 2008 requesting from local governments, Church officials, and other entities the names of victims of Franco's repression. The result was a veritable census "of the disappeared" consisting of 114,266 individuals. Emilio Silva hailed Garzón's action as a first step towards a "truth commission," but judges contested Garzón's right to proceed citing

the 1977 Law of Amnesty. Garzón initially ordered the exhumation of 19 more unmarked graves maintaining his authority in these cases because Franco carried out a coup against a legally elected government, a crime that is in the realm of the Audiencia Nacional's jurisdiction. Judge Garzón has since conceded jurisdiction in these matters to local courts and governments in Spain.

¹⁰ Juan Carlos Martín "Historia y ficción en *Soldados de Salamina*," *Ojancano* 28 (2005) 41-64.

¹¹ Javier Cercas, David Airob and David Trueba, *Diálogos de Salamina* (Barcelona: Tusquets, 2003).